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ABSTRACT

A discussion of cultural differences in politeness in speech focuses on differences between and among American, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean cultural patterns and the role that language can play in creating misunderstanding. It is argued that effective intercultural communication requires cultural competence. Examples are offered concerning a variety of situations: response to invitations; response to compliments; the potential imprecision of literal translation; lack of pronoun usage; ambiguity in some expressions; differential mental organization as reflected in syntax and grammar; use or non-use of the word "no"; and the need to save face. The American in an Asian culture is reminded to avoid confrontation and practice indirect speech. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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ON CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: WHY A POSITIVE ANSWER SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

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0. INTRODUCTION

Technological advances in communication, travel, and transportation have made business increasingly global. This trend is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Thus, the chances that one will have to communicate with people from other cultures are good.

When the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, made the diplomatically inappropriate comment to the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, in the 1993 Summit Meeting in Vancouver -- "For the Japanese, saying YES can mean NO." -- he offended the Japanese so much that the spokesman of the White House had to clarify by saying that the President simply made, from a Western point of view, an observation on the Japanese etiquette; no criticism was intended.

1. CULTURAL COMPETENCY

As communication patterns become globalized, we should enhance our cultural competency to communicate better with people from other cultures. And yet, how many us may deem ourselves culturally competent? It is especially difficult when the two cultures in contact are geographically apart. Assuming a Western position, below are three simple questions one may test oneself regarding one's knowledge of the Oriental cultures:

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* What should one do to comply to the Korean social decorum when invited by a Korean to dinner?

* What is an acceptable reaction, by a Chinese norm, when one is praised for excellent performance at work?

* How should one behave in order to be considered polite when offered tea or soup by the Japanese?

The manner in which one responds to the above situations will tell much about one's capacity to understand and respect a culture not his own. In korea, invitations are traditionally offered in what may appear to be a courting ritual. The host will ask, and you'll express your thanks politely but hesitate to accept the invitation. Having noted your hesitation, your host will ask again, and you in turn will indicate, with perhaps some emphasis, that you're honored by the invitation and that your host is only too kind. In short, you hesitate to accept until the invitation is offered a third time -- your cue to accept gracefully and note the time and place. Well, were you to accept the invitation immediately, a broad-minded Korean would no doubt forgive you; but there would now be a caution in his or her mind that you might perhaps be a little harsh and lacking decorum (Andrews & Andrews, 1992:44).

When you are in Rome, do as the Romans do. Therefore, you are not supposed to accept a praise in China by saying "Thank you." In order for you not to seem pompous, you are supposed to say something to the contrary, even to apologize, regardless of how highly you may think at heart about your own achievement. This is the golden rule for the workplace as well as for social

occasions. If you are a capable hostess who prepares a dinner of 10 or 12 delicious dishes for your invited guests and are praised for your wonderful cooking feat, you not only need to deny the fact that you cook well, but you also are expected to apologize for "simplleness" and "shabbiness" of your offering -- there are ONLY 10 or 12 dishes and there is always room for a more elaborated dinner.

The same applies to the Japanese in facing compliments. An American who is complimented on giving a good oral presentation will probably say "Thank you." A Japanese in contrast, will apologize, "No, it wasn't very good." (Kyumayama 1987.)

In terms of being offered something to drink in Japan, one should know that tea-drinking is considered a matter of art and is treated with ceremonious ritual. In order to show your host or hostess that what is offered to you, tea or soup, is delicious, you are supposed to drink it with a loud noise, which is just the opposite to the Western etiquette where you are advised not to make any noise during the meal.

2. CULTURE

Failing to recognize cultural difference is bound to lead to miscommunication. Before defining culture, I will present this classic defense of cultrual difference, taken from Lesikar (1993: 649):

> The classsic "ugly American" was traveling in a faraway land. He had been critical of much of what he experienced -- the food, the hotels, the customs in general. One day he came upon a funeral. He observed that the mourners placed food on the grave --

and left it there.

"What a stupid practice!" he exclaimed to his native host. "Do your people actually think that the dead person will eat the food?"

At this point, the host had taken all the insults he could handle for one day. So he replied, "Our dead will eat the food as soon as your dead smell the flowers you place on their graves."

Culture has been defined in many ways. The definition most useful in the discussion is one derived from anthropology: culture is "a way of life of a group of people ... the stereotyped patterns of learning behavior, which are handed down from one generation to the next through the means of language and imitation." (Barnouw 1963:4) That is, people living in different geographic areas have developed different ways of life -- different habits, values, and different ways of relating to one another.

Specifically, communication between people of different cultures is affected, as pointed out by Lesikar (1993: 647), by two kinds of differences: (1) differences in body positions and movements and (2) differences in attitudes toward various factors of human relationships (time, space, intimacy, and so on.) Murphy & Hildebrandt (1988:670) mentioned that cultural variables such as social norms, language, manners, decision-making, time, space, education, food, dress etc. may communicate verbally and nonverbally from the message sender to the receiver. In what follows, two major differences, language and mentality will be

discussed to provide possible explanation for misunderstanding or difficulty in communication between the Orientals and the Westerners, with special reference to why a positive answer can imply a totally negative meaning.

3. LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE

The best way to avoid culture shock for businesspersons is to know the language of the nation in which they work. However, most North Americans usually do not have the language facility and are completely dependent on the English language ability of the foreign businessperson or the ability of an interpreter or translator. Tokyo trade ministers have argued that the lack of American exports in their country is not due to Japanese import restrictions but due to the inability of American business people to speak Japanese (Wells 1988). It is true that one can buy in any language; but to sell, one had better speak the buyer's language.

3.1. TRANSLATION

One reason that Japanese "yes" can mean "no" is that there lacks a precise equivalent for translation from the source language (Japanese) to the target language (English). Just as there is no word in Spanish to distinguish between a "chiarman" and a "president", Japanese depends heavily on the speech context (the situation, the speaker etc.) for the interpretation of the word.

A professor once complained about a graduate student recently from Japan because, while indicating she would go to the

advisor-advisee dinner meeting, she did not even apologize for failing to keep the appointment. The profesoor recalled the Japanese saying "Yes, yes" two times to his invitation. Since the student had only lived for one or two months in an English-speaking country, she might not understand the message but was afraid to admit it. She was afraid of losing her face, especially because she was dealing with her advisor. Even if she understood the message, she probably said "yes, yes" because she was translating literally "hai, hai", a Japanese expression often used at the beginning of one's turn to speak, to show that one has paid attention to what is said.

As a rule, "hai" is normally used in affirmative sentence to show agreement, as opposed to the negative "i-i-e", which means "no", as shown in the following examples:

1) Q: Sono kutusshita o san-zoku kudasai.
this socks three pairs please
(Please give me three pairs of this kind of socks.)

A: Hai, kashikomalimashita.
yes your wish is heard
(Yes, I'll do it right away.)

2) Q: 3800 yen desu.
dollar
(All together, 3800 dollars.)

A: Hai.
yes
(Here is the money.)

3.2. ZERO PRONOUN

Grammar and syntax present another difficulty for translation from Japnese to English. Japanese, like Chinese, does not require subject-verb agreement and there is no marking

in the verb to show the conjugation between person and verb. Because subject-less sentences are grammatical sentences and are commonly used, the interpretation of a Japanese sentence can be highly difficult. One has to first decide the speech context to assign the correct reference of the sentence, and thus, to the correct meaning of the sentence. For example

gako e ikimasu
school post-pos go
(I/he/she go/goes to school).

can mean either "I go to school" or "he/she goes to school."

3.3. AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity may arise, in addition to the structure, from the lexical items. For example, the same term "e-e", similar to the word "hai", can be used in positive or negative sentences and the interpretation depends solely upon the speech context.

3) A: Kono enpitsu wa Honda-san no dewa arimasen ka?
this pencil . Mr. POSS have-NEG
(Isn't this Mr. Honda's pencil?)

Honda: E-e, watashi no dewa arimasen.
yes I POSS have-NEG
(No, it is not mine.)

4) Q: Mata aimasen ka?
once more meet-NEG
(Are we not going to meet once more?)

A: E-e.
yes
(Yes.)

3.4. LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC RULES

Japanese, like Chinese, uses a positive answer to signify agreement, whether the sentence is negative or positive. For example, a response of "yes" to the question "You have not finished your work, have you?" means "I have not," while one uses "no" for negative and "yes" for positive answer in the English sentence. To mean that "I have not yet finished my work" in English, one would have to answer "no" instead of "yes" at the beginning of his/her reply.

5) Q: Kore wa anata no shokudai dewa arimasen ka?
this you POSS homework have-NEG
(Is this not your homework?)

A: Hai, watashi no dewa arimasen.
yes I POSS have-NEG
(No, it is not mine.)

6) Q: Anata ashita toko ka e ikimasu ka?
you tomorros where go
(Are you going somewhere tomoroow?)

A: Hai, ikimasu.
yes go
(Yes, I am going somewhere.)

4. MENTALITY

Chikudate (1991) reports the results of comparative analyses of the cognitive systems of Japanese and American organizational members. It is empirically confirmed that Japanese order and arrange in their minds the meaningful elements of their lives in organizations differently from the Americans.

The fact that Japanese, unlike English or Spanish, is an SOV (verb final) language may have something to do with the

misunderstanding encountered. The normal word order for English is SVO (subject-verb-object) while that for Japanese is SOV (subject-object-verb), a verb-final language.

7)	ano	hito	wa	ue	ni	kaerimasu
	that	person	subj marker	home	post-position	come back

(That person is coming home.)

Because the verb is at the end of the sentence, this enables the Japanese to begin to express a thought and watch the receiver's reaction. Depending on how the receiver is reacting to the message, the verb may be changed, thereby changing the whole meaning of the sentence. For example, a Japanese might start to say, "Please go away from me now" and change it to "Please stay with me now" by changing the verb, which is said last. (Harcourt, Krizan and Merrier, 1991:504)

People in different cultures are different, and they see things differently. As in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, "Much of what you see depends on how you look." Because the Japanese are comfortable with silence, they are often seen by outsiders as overly quite, enigmatic, and inscrutable. In a fairly recent survey in Japan, 76 percent of the respondents thought a taciturn person should be more successful in business than a fluent one (Kunihiro 1990: 15).

Mentality is a broad term which includes attitudes toward human relationships such as values, social behaviors, openness, directness etc. Different cultural values exist in different

cultures. Below, taken from Sigband & Bell (1989), is a comparison of cultural values in a low-context culture (e.g., the United States) and those in a high-context culture (e.g. Japan and China):

LOW-CONTEXT CULTURE Western	HIGH-CONTEXT CULTURE Oriental
control over the environment	fate
change	tradition
time and its control	human interactions
equality	hierarchy/rank/status
individualism/privacy	Welfare of the group
self-help	birthright inheritance
competition	cooperation
future orientation	past orientation
Action-work orientation	"Being" orientation
informality	formality
Directness/openness/honesty	indirectness/ritual/face
practicality/efficiency	idealism
materialism/acquisitiveness	spiritualism/detachment

Because of the difference in cultural values, one will need to note the different types of cultures and their various manisfetations, i.e., their "mentality."

4.1. NEVER SAYING "NO"

In some cultures, saying "no" is considered so impolite that people simply do not use the word. Japan, being a country of such culture, uses the word "no" in filling out forms but avoids it in conversation. When it can not be avoided, sayiny "yes" simply means "Yes, I understand you." not "Yes, I agree." (Andrews & Andrews, 1992:41)

Other ways used by the Japanese to avoid open confrontation by saying "no" include (Locker 1989:234):

a. silence
b. vague and ambiguous answers
c. counterquestions
d. changing the subject
e. conditional and delaying answers
f. apologies

Koreans and Chinese share with the Japanese in this respect (Locker 1989:234). Without the cultural knowledge that a "yes" sometimes can not be taken seriously may create misunderstandings of or even negative impressions on the Asians.

4.2. HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

For the Japanese, confrontations are to be avoided. They prefer indirectness in approaching business transactions. They may seem to agree with you in order to avoid offending you. (Harcourt, Krizan & Merrier, 1991:516.) According to James (1992:50), a "yes" by an Asian in a meeting could mean one of three things:

a) "I understand what you said but I don't necessarily agree."

b) "I don't understand what you said but I don't want to offend you, or embarrass myself, by saying I don't understand you."

c) "I agree."

As pointed out by Bovee (1992:561), some Asian-born customers hesitate to complain because they feel it is disruptive of social harmony. In other words, to avoid confrontation is to maintain social harmony, which is very important to the Asians. It is therefore quite easy to understand why the Japanese would say "yes" even though they do not mean it.

The same principle applies to the Chinese. When the Chinese negotiate, the opening phase not only establishes a set of principles but it also initiates a friendship relation. The Chinese style is first to establish a relationship and, second, to use the relationship as a basis for give and take.The Chinese rely on implicit bases of trust. They trust intuition, personal relationships and friendship (Banthin & Stelzer,1991).

4.3. FACE

The concept of "face" is taken from Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1982) discussion of the "politeness" phenomena. "Face" is a very important concept in understanding the Japanese, in fact, the Asian culture -- nothing can be more embarrasing than losing one's face. "Face" is the second life for the Asians.

The manifestations of "face" as a cultural value can be clearly seen from the following, taken from Bovee (1992:561):

-- When an Asian does not ask question, one may not assume that the message is well understood or there is no question to be asked.

-- Nodding and smiling from an Asian is no guarantee that you are being understood.

-- An Asian who laughs at an inappropriate spot during your speech may mean that he or she does not understand what you are saying and is embarrassed.

One keeps silent, nods, smiles or laughs because to ask stupid questions or to admit that one does not understand what is said is losing one's "face."

In Japan, the beginning point of a business culture is hierarchical, personal relations. One avoids direct and open

confrontation because one's face is of extreme importance. Often, a third party is engaged to smooth any potential conflicts in advance. In such a hierarchical society, how one talks, not what one talks about, is important. One does not want to lose face or feel embarrassed by adopting an inappropriate social position. This explains why many Japanese are hesitant to introduce themselves to strangers and when there is no third person around, a Japanese does not usually talks until "meishis" (business cards) are exchanged (Andrews & Andrews 1992).

5. CONCLUSION

What all this means is obvious. As we communicate more and more across cultures, we must become more knowledgeable in terms of cross-cultrual communication. To overcome cultural differences regarding language problems and mentality differences, one should never underestimate the language barrier. When English is used to communicate with the Asians, Westerners should not talk fast or use slang or jargon. Neither side should move on to a new point until the point it is making seems fully understood. Bear in mind that words will probably be taken literally. If you say to Asians that you believe your interests are "parallel" or "in line" with theirs, they might wonder why your interests do not "converge" with theirs or are not the "same." (James 1992:51)

One should also pay more attention to the importance maintaining harmony when dealing with the Oriental cultures. Master the skills of being indirect. Think of positive ways to

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present an issue but try not to be confrontational. Westerners should avoid their customary informality and use last names only. When addressing the Asians, titles should be used. Don't interrupt; this is considered very rude. Don't openly disagree with your own teammates and don't talk loudly or brag.

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